2021 census submission

Having read the consultation paper (2007.0) I wish to make a submission, not on potential questions but on three questions in the 2016 (and previous) censuses. I base my submission on my experience in trying to make sense of census output (particularly small-area output) from the past five censuses and from trying to reconcile census details with details from other ABS output.

question 7, 'Is the person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander island origin?'

Obviously, determining the number of Australia's 'indigenous' is a sensitive and important matter. In my view the wording of this question since the 1967 repeal of section 127 of the Constitution which had previously prohibited 'reckoning the numbers' of 'aboriginal *natives'* [my italics], whatever that may have meant to those who framed the Constitution (presumably indigenous in tribal and other remote communities), has never addressed the purpose of the question.

It is well established that some people with indigenous backgrounds (mixed-race) were counted in some pre-1967 censuses and that 'indigenous' populations have grown between censuses since 1971 much faster than can be explained by natural increases. I suggest that much of this growth can be attributed to the wording of the question which may encourage Australian residents with some known indigenous ancestry to respond 'yes' to the question (leading thereby to counting them as 'indigenou's, regardless of whether they identify as such or otherwise).

My concern about this capturing the number of residents who believe they have some indigenous 'origin' is that the un-natural inter-censal increase in 'yes' responses to question 7 as it is now worded, may be distorting the reporting of socio-economic descriptors (eg of education and income) in ways that do not help policy makers address disadvantage in Australia's only population that is defined on the basis of race.

The consultation paper makes clear that the purpose of question 7 is to capture the number of people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. That is not clear in the current wording of the question and the question should read accordingly as **'does the person identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?'** or, better, **'is the person Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?'**

As to the separate responding of census results for those who have responded 'yes' to question 7, I quibble with the use of the word 'community' to describe residents of indigenous 'origin' in much of Australia where these people are in small numbers in the populations of wider suburbs or statistical areas and have little or no connection with each other in the sense of belonging to a 'community'.

Also, if particular groups are to be singled out for census reporting I wonder whether it might be helpful for policy purposes to make it easier to assess disadvantage in other Australian populations such as muslim adherents or residents of Lebanese ancestry .

Question 18, 'What is the person's ancestry?' with provision for two ancestries

For most people 'ancestry' refers to a personal lineage of forebears traced back to any or all of: a place; a culture; a race; or even a country of citizenship. The responses reported to this question suggest that, to be useful, the question needs prompts that clarify what ancestral information is wanted and it needs to allow for more than two ancestral origins.

To judge from the range of suggested responses, the question probably seeks responses that indicate 'place ancestries', as question 7 appears to have asked about a particular 'race-ancestry' while questions 12, 14 and 15 seek information that sheds light on a person's and parent(s)' birthplaces which might be used as a proxy for cultural- and citizenship- ancestries.

However, I doubt whether many respondents view their ancestries simply in terms of place origins. As an example I'd point to the many respondents who indicated unprompted that they had a 'Maori' ancestry, who might – or their ancestors might – have come from any of a number of Pacific countries, including New Zealand and indeed Australia. Similarly, I wonder whether 'Chinese' in the prompts is meant to include residents with an ethnic-Chines origin in Southeast Asia (and Taiwan) or indeed Australia and New Zealand. Oh, and mainland China.

Having said that, I point to the relatively large number of 'non-indigenous' [as self-defined] residents who see their ancestries as 'Australian', and on the other hand the relatively few residents with an 'indigenous' origin who indicate their ancestry as 'Australian'.

My second problem with the question as it stands is that it provides for only two ancestral origins which isn't helpful when we know already that so many residents have one or two parents born overseas.

I as a Kiwi Australian would regard my ancestry as 'pakeha New Zealander' which defines my immediate ancestry in terms of birthplace, culture, race and citizenship, and the ancestries of my parents and three of my grandparents (the other came from England, in the United Kingdom). But, back another generation, and I have great-great grandparents who were born in Australia (a non-indigenous man, himself a third generation Taswegian), Prussia, Ireland, Scotland and England.

Similarly, my wife might describe herself as of Jewish-Australian ancestry, which reflects her racial and cultural origins but gives no sense of her Anglo-Jewish or Russian Lithuanian or Polish Jewish roots. But she is not a Jew by faith. So: is her ancestry Jewish?

The question needs to seek more precise information if it is to be useful. In the absence of census forms being kept for posterity, question 18 adds little to what we already know about Australian residents' ancestries.

Question 33, 'what is the total of all the income the person usually receives' (persons 15 and over)

This is a really important question for understanding of advantage/disadvantage, and indeed the personal income sector, within the Australian economy. Yet, while census output from this question throws some light on relativities (between places and over time) and perhaps on the composition of personal income, I wonder whether measures of distribution such as median individual, family and household income are of much value, especially when they are so much at variance with (the incomplete) published small area data on personal incomes (http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/6524.0.55.002)

As the question is pretty clearly explained, responses should be precise. However, I wonder how seriously many respondents take their self-reporting of income and indeed how up-to-date are the eg tax returns and benefit statements to which some respondents might refer.

More seriously, I question whether the medians (and any other measures of income distribution) are of great value derived from income classes with spreads of$200 weekly and more have much statistical relevance.

However, I have no solution to these problems, beyond narrowing the ranges within classes. Asking respondents to nominate their income is probably like asking them blindfold to pin a tail onto the donkey! Perhaps the answer lies in incorporating more complete income data (ie including age-pensions and tax-free retirement income streams in the small area estimates.